New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1951

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NEW YORK MIRROR
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NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Antony and Cleopatra"

The New York Times

December 21, 1951

'Antony and Cleopatra' Put On by the Oliviers as the Second of Their Twin Bill

By BROOKS ATKINSON

What the Oliviers began on Wednesday evening they completed last evening magnificently. In their scheme the Shaw play about Cleopatra is prologue to Shakespeare's romantic tragedy, "Antony and Cleopatra," which opened at the Ziegfeld last evening and brought us a memorable experience in the theatre.

For Laurence Olivier as the reckless Antony and Vivien Leigh as the royal Cleopatra are perfectly matched in a production that conveys the richness, fire and majesty of Shakespeare. There has not been an "Antony and Cleopatra" to compare with this in New York in the last quarter of a century; and there have not been many productions of any Shakespearian play that have approached this exalted quality.

Shakespeare made "Antony and Cleopatra" difficult for the modern stage by writing it in so many brief acts and skipping rapidly over so vast a landscape. In the production directed by Michael Benthall it now looks easy and logical. Putting Roger Furse's vivid settings on a revolving stage, they move swiftly through the rosy corridors of Shakespeare's drama; and they have caught up all the details of an epochal love-story into great dramatic design. Audrey Cruddas' costumes are gorgeous. Herbert Menges' incidental score is pertinent and theatrical. Although the details of the production are multitudinous, the drama has the headlong simplicity of an integrated work of art.

* * *

Miss Leigh's Cleopatra is superb. We all knew that she would look glorious in the Egyptian costumes and that she would be every inch a queen. But it is a pleasure to report that she also has captured the infinite variety of the ruler of the Nile. She is smoldering and sensual, wily and treacherous, but she is also intelligent, audacious and courageous. And when destiny turns against her she does not go down whimpering but with pride and glory, looking grand in her regal vestments, looking cool, grave and triumphant.

Mr. Olivier's Antony is worthy of her mettle. He may be willful and selfish, but he is a man of breeding, with the authority of an old campaigner, as ready to carouse in a Roman naval ship as to buckle on his armor and plunge with confidence and joy into battle. Like Miss Leigh, Mr. Olivier has mastered all the qualities of a full-blooded human being; and their immortal affair in Egypt is a true mingling of passion, defiance and enjoyment; and when they are dead, you know that they have lived resolutely.

Wednesday's "Caesar and Cleopatra" proved that the Olivier troupe can play together with the harmony of a well-disciplined orchestra. Despite the variety of the characterizations, they also play together with easy grace in "Antony and Cleopatra." Most of the characters are boldly defined as individuals and give the production a tart, stinging flavor.

Harry Andrews' swaggering, but shrewd and honest Enobarbus, Robert Helpmann's ascetic, petulant Octavius Caesar, Niall MacGinnis' belligerent though comradely Pompey are characters with strong personalities. They and their associates live every minute with vigor and awareness.

But they all blend into the sweeping, highly-figured tapestry of Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra." The poetry is the speech of heroes. The action is real and the conclusion inevitable. It is as though "Antony and Cleopatra" never had been played before. Everything about the Olivier production is glowing or crackling with vitality.

"ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA"

Play by William Shakespeare; staged by Michael Benthall; settings by Roger Furse; costumes by Audrey Cruddas; music by Herbert Menges; presented by Gilbert Miller at the Ziegfeld Theatre, December 20, 1951. The cast:

Philo Canidius.....David Greene
Cleopatra.....Vivien Leigh
Antony.....Laurence Olivier
Mardian.....Harold Kasket
The Messenger...Alex McCowen
Scarus Dercetas.....
Patrick Troughton
Charmian.....Katharine Blake
Alexas Diomedes.....
Robert Beaumont
Lemprius Euphronius.....
Donald Pleasence
Enobarbus.....Harry Andrews
Iras.....Mairhi Russell
Octavius Caesar.....
Robert Helpmann
Lepidus.....Wilfrid Hyde White
Maecenas.....Jack Melford
Agrippa.....Ronald Adam
Octavia.....Elizabeth Kentish
Pompey.....Niall MacGinnis
Menas.....Max Gardiner
Attendant on Octavia....Pat Nye
Old Soldier.....Anthony Pelly
Eros.....Lyndon Brook
Dolabella.....Dan Cunningham
Thydeus.....Edmund Purdom
Nubian Messenger.....Cy Grant
A Soldier of Caesar.....
Oliver Hunter

Synopsis: The scenes represented take place in Alexandria, Rome, a Galley near Misenum, a Plain near Actium, between two opposing camps before Alexandria, and outside and inside Cleopatra's Monument.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

December 21, 1951

"ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA"

By WALTER F. KERR

LAURENCE OLIVIER and Vivien Leigh have performed the near miracle of pulling the sprawling canvas of Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra" into a coherent and increasingly exciting whole. They have been immensely aided by the speed and uniform style of Roger Furse's turntables settings, by the evocative qualities in Herbert Menges' transitional music, and by the pantomimic devices with which director Michael Benthall has related one scene to another.

But mainly they have done it out of their own resources. The two stars, in offering us the second of their twin historical plays at the Ziegfeld Thursday night, have provided characterizations of such breadth, such firm outline, and such unflagging intensity as to weld together the play's infinite and difficult diversity by main strength. In their hands an almost chaotic welter of politics, passion and pure poetry takes on shape and drive.

* * *

Olivier is the master here. For the Antony who is libertine, soldier, renegade and man of honor all rolled into one he has found an honest and exhilarating pattern. He supplies his able but wayward commander with both the endearing and the exasperating qualities of an overgrown boy —impatient, exuberant, fatally rash—and it is a happy stroke of the imagination.

It leads to some very fresh and very perceptive playing of familiar scenes. Notable among them is that in which Antony, recalled from his Egyptian dalliance, is exposed to Caesar's rebuke. The cool boredom and only faintly concealed contempt with which Olivier accepts his punishment—for all the world like a spoiled child—is a masterpiece of suggestion, of preparation for the reckless disobedience which is to come. Again, his stricken and shamefaced return from the battle of Actium—with its utter disbelief in the fact of defeat—conveys wonderfully the immaturity of the man. And all of this leads to the cheap and self-conscious bravado, and the uncontrolled fury, of the challenging final scenes. Olivier's Antony is a man whose future is written all over his face from the beginning; and the process of disintegration is magnificently charted.

* * *

The actor is not without fault. He sometimes jumps at a scene as though from a springboard, and he is capable of rant. If it is ungrateful of a reviewer to point these things out, Mr. Olivier has only himself to blame. He has come so close to perfection in his Antony as to make perfection suddenly seem possible, and to make us ask for it.

Miss Leigh, too, is at the top of her form. Behind the petulance and the devious femininity of the part, she has got a hard, controlled spine; she can manage the shrewish guile of the scene in which she inquires about Antony's new wife, and the cold desperation of her decision to die, with equal authority. Her use of gesture is not always all that it might be, and her poetry sometimes turns into plain song; but she is a beautiful and talented woman with real command of the stage.

Robert Helpmann makes a great deal of his sober, thin-lipped, suspicious Caesar. Like the stars, he is able to get at several facets of a part; after playing the relentless pursuer all evening, he is extremely moving in his final tribute to Antony. Harry Andrews, Niall MacGinnis, and Wilfred Hyde White are especially effective in supporting roles.

But it is the Oliviers' evening. They have shocked an erratic play into vibrant stage life.

Journal American

December 21, 1951

Here's Shakespeare --At a High Level

By JOHN McCLAIN

Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh last night unveiled at the Ziegfeld Theatre the second of their two-play repertory which is being presented for a limited engagement locally by Gilbert Miller. The first effort was "Caesar and Cleopatra" by G. B. Shaw; now we have "Antony and Cleopatra" by Shakespeare, thus completing a cycle and inviting all manner of comparisons.

I would prefer to withdraw from any evaluation, one against the other, at the outset. You want comedy? Okay, go and see "Caesar." You want Shakespeare—melodious and massive? Ask the nearest broker for "Antony," the show that opened last night. He may get you a single in the balcony two weeks from Wednesday.

Accepting the premise that Shakespeare can out-write Shaw with his left hand, although neither play is the triple-A offering of either author, I was somewhat let down by the Olivier-Leigh ceremonies dedicated to The Bard.

• • •

Stylized Form

Shakespeare is tough enough to understand even when you can hear it, and there were many moments last evening when the discourse wasn't intelligible in the fifth row. There also is the irritating (to me, at least) fact that because one is performing Shakespeare he must resort to a stylized form of posturing and voice control bearing no resemblance to any person living or (so sue me) dead.

The night before, Olivier had exhibited his ability to shuffle through the role of the mild and weary Caesar, depending upon his incredible voice and the elevation of an eyebrow to bring depth to his lines. Antony is of course a younger and more vigorous character, but one wonders if a less demonstrative technique might not be just as effective.

Miss Leigh was constantly audible, but again I thought she over-employed her voice range, notably in the memorable scene leading to her suicide. I know all this is in the classical tradition; I'm only saying she could have scored as heavily with moderation.

Was Superb

In contrast, I thought Robert Helpmann as Octavius Caesar, was superb. He turned in a straightforward and highly believable job as the somewhat under-talented nephew of the great Julius who finally defeats Antony and stimuates the demise of both principals.

Harry Andrews, as Enobarbus (sounds like a new sleeping pill), performed with authority but was guilty also of becoming unintelligible in his more enthusiastic moments.

Of the others I approved highly of David Greene as Canidius; Harold Kasket as Mardian; Katharine Blake as Charmian; Wilfrid Hyde White as Lepidus; Niall MacGinnis as Pompey and Dan Cunningham as Dolabella.

Don't get me wrong, please. This is Shakespeare—proficient and professional. It is mounted with consistent taste; it could probably run forever.

May I be pardoned for saying it is not my personal cup of tea?

DAILY NEWS

December 21, 1951

Olivier, Leigh Triumph Once Again In a Fine 'Antony and Cleopatra'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Together with Shaw's "Caesar and Cleopatra," Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra" makes a brilliant and brilliantly achieved repertoire for Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh and their fine company from London. The Shakespeare tragedy was given its first performance last evening at the Ziegfeld Theatre.

So brilliant a comedy and so grand a tragedy are an enormous test of the skill and physical resources of the two stars, but Olivier and Miss Leigh come through the test triumphantly. Once again Olivier plays with clear intelligence, and to this he has added the fire of passion—for Shakespeare's Antony is far different from Shaw's Caesar. Caesar's ardors had long cooled, whilst Antony's drove him relentlessly on to doom.

Olivier is not the huge, brawling and imperious Antony whom Godbrey Tearle played in Katharine Cornell's production a few years back. There is tenderness in his lust for Cleopatra, and there is more pathos in his downfall. It is an interesting and highly individual impersonation, and one that is most beautifully shaded and paced.

Now a Tragic Queen.

Remarkable too is Miss Leigh's second interpretation of Cleopatra. Shaw's little girl is one of childish whim and virginal beauty; Shakespeare's queen is a great figure of tragedy—and Miss Leigh makes her so. Her voice, so light and pretty in the comedy, is an instrument of depth and power in the tragedy. In her case and in Olivier's, the impersonations in the two plays seem to have been varied from deep within themselves, and are not the surface trickery of less devoted actors.

Michael Benthall has directed "Antony and Cleopatra" almost as if it were a piece of music; it has harmony and tonal coloration, soft passages and climaxes, all effected with the mathematical accuracy of musical form. It is a fluid production, but not a hurried one; the majesty of a scene is not sacrificed for the sake of pace.

The Versatile Helpmann.

Again the other players are generally excellent—Harry Andrews as Enobarbus, Wilfred Hyde White as Lepidus, and Katharine Blake as Charmian among them. Most interesting to me is the performance of Robert Helpmann as Octavius Caesar—a pale, slight and cold Caesar who yet can weep at news of Antony's death. It is an unusual piece of work, all the more remarkable because it is done by the man who, just the night before, was the debonair, singing art dealer of Shaw's comedy. When one considers that Helpmann also has been a leading dancer with the Sadler's Wells Ballet, one must admit that he is a man of astonishing talent.

Even more than in the previous evening, Herbert Menges' music is of fine assistance to the presentation, and is well played by Jacques Singer's orchestra. Roger Furse's unit set is again used with fine pictorial effect, and the Sphinx that once was young Cleopatra's own "little Sphinx" is now, as it should be, her tomb.

I imagine it will be a long time before two such plays as these are again successfully paired in repertoire.

New York World-Telegram
and
The [illegible] Sun

December 21, 1951

Miss Leigh at Best In Lavish 'Antony'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

With sumptuous pageantry, the Olivier-Leigh duo of classics about Cleopatra was completed last night with Shakespeare's tragedy.

The Shaw comedy, and now "Antony and Cleopatra," together constitute the most widely hailed project of the Festival of Britain last summer. Their presentation here has already elicited a wild quantity of fanfare. The circusy aspect of the first play is faithfully continued here, and the twin history moves with all the pomp one expects in connection with a vast commemoration.

The Shakespeare tragedy has some of the most beautifully romantic sequences. It also contains some of his most inexplicable political palaver, and warfare. Antony loses favor in Rome for choosing to stay in Egypt with Cleopatra.

Theater Carousel.

His fortunes vary, and at their lowest ebb he believes the Queen has betrayed him. In a rage at his attack, she lets him think she has killed herself, and in remorseful agony he commits suicide. Her fickle petulance leaves her no recourse against the Roman invaders, but the famous asp.

The battles, conclaves and romances shift madly around the Mediterranean, by virtue of a huge revolving stage. It is almost impossible to keep track of who is fighting whom, or winning. This amphitheatrical carousel gives the play great flow and speed, and it also gives the onlooker occasional vertigo.

Kingdoms For Love.

Shakespeare's play concerns kingdoms lost for love. To make this believable, the personal story ought to be as strong as the spectacle. In this festive production, the individuals have a rough time making themselves felt through the busy hippodrome of excitement.

In the long run, though, Vivien Leigh dominates the play, as she certainly should. With long, straight red hair and flowing wings of sleeves, she looks like an Aubrey Beardsley drawing—erotic, somewhat morbid, and very imperious.

As she walks with a sideways swing of the shoulders and carefully pointed toe, her Queen maintains a convincing elegance. Sometimes in her speech there is more melody than meaning, more flowing line than rhythm. But in the farewell to Antony at the Sphinx, she does what may well be the strongest acting of her career.

Olivier is naturally enough at his best when the crowds move aside, and he has a situation to dominate. He projects real terror with the big scene of irrational jealousy in the second act, and is animal-like with passion when he believes he is betrayed.

His death is played all for Miss Leigh and provides her finest moment. Hers is moving for its pictorial splendor.

Robert Helpmann is as cold and noble as a marble statue as Octavius Caesar, ruthlessly conniving against his enemies. As the gruff, tender and sadly treacherous Enobarbus, Harry Andrews is most helpful.

In both these productions, words end up second best to music, color and action. Lavish production overrides poetry and ideas.

New York Post

December 21, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

Cleopatra and Her Other Roman

Shakespeare took over from his old sparring partner, Shaw, last night in the Cleopatra cycle at the Ziegfeld Theater, and once more the Oliviers demonstrated that they are the most attractive romantic players currently practicing the histrionic art. I have more reservations about their "Antony and Cleopatra" than I had concerning their "Caesar and Cleopatra" the previous evening, but, it is nonetheless another brilliant and colorful dramatic entertainment, vivid, alive and stimulating. There is, I think, little doubt that the two stars have lived up to their advance billing.

"Antony and Cleopatra," as everyone knows by now, is an extremely difficult play to act and produce, and the number of its successful presentations is extremely small. Indeed, the best performance I have ever encountered was the one Miss Cornell offered here several seasons ago, with Godfrey Tearle as Antony and Kent Smith as the introspective bystander, Enobarbus. It is my impression that the American actress-manager vanquished its handicaps more satisfactorily than Mr. Olivier and Miss Leigh have managed to do, but that is not to deny that the current production deserves attention and respect.

Vivien Leigh

Again it is Miss Leigh who is the revelation of the evening. It is very clear that this fascinating young woman is constantly growing in stature as an actress. I think I can testify to that fact, because it is my firm conviction that she is now playing Cleopatra with infinitely more depth and range than she demonstrated when she was acting this enormously difficult role in London last summer. She brings remarkable power, insight, variety and feeling to the part of the unstable, complex and passion-wracked Queen, and, added to her rare personal quality of magnetic beauty, the result is a performance of distinction.

Mr. Olivier, I think, is slightly less satisfying in his characterization. He plays, as usual, with intelligence, force and frequent eloquence, and he makes the hapless Roman a dramatic figure and a touching one. But there are times when his scenes of passionate emotion lead him into an inarticulateness that interferes with the quality of the Shakespearean verse, and he doesn't quite get into his portrayal the feeling of broken greatness that Mr. Tearle achieved so movingly. He shows us Antony as the aging and doomed lover, but hardly as the wreck of one who had once ruled a third of the known world.

Enobarbus

The role of Enobarbus has always seemed to me one of the most interesting in all of Shakespeare. Enobarbus is, to a great extent, the key to the drama, because it is chiefly through his eyes that we see the collapse of Antony and recognize what a giant he had been. The best portrayal of the part I have ever seen was that of Mr. Smith in the Cornell version, and Harry Andrews, of the Olivier company, is certainly not up to his American predecessor in demonstrating the personal tragedy of the man who had devoted himself to the service of an unworthy leader. It is a passable performance, but not more than that.

Being romantic actors, it is quite natural that the Oliviers have concentrated on the tragedy of the weary and doomed lovers and have tended to neglect the background of the collapse of a world, which serves as counterpoint to it. They do not, I think, give us as satisfying a play as "Caesar and Cleopatra." But they and their production are nevertheless fascinating to watch, through their showmanship, their zest for what they are doing, and, to get right down to it, their charm. Their supporting players, too, are interesting to see because they play together so well. I can only repeat from yesterday that Mr. Olivier and Miss Leigh have brought glamor back to the theater.

Daily Mirror

December 21, 1951

Olivier, Leigh Brilliant In 'Antony and Cleopatra'

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh brought distinction and excitement to our theatre last evening, with their superb production of William Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra." They and their associates have managed to achieve characterization and still do justice to the ring of the Bard's magnificent verse.

Too often, Shakespearean presentations, in seeking to capture scope and beauty of line, sacrifice the characters. The principals become voices rather than people.

The Leigh-Olivier revival, however, catches admirably all the facets of the play. It is rounded drama, eloquent and thrilling.

A notable asset of this "Antony and Cleopatra" also is its fluidity. Michael Benthall's resourceful direction, Roger Furse's sets mounted on a turntable, and Jacques Singer's orchestra prevent lulls for scenic changes. Each episode flows smoothly into the next one. There are no blackouts or curtain lowerings during the three acts to impede the action.

Olivier is brilliant as the aging, luxury-weakened Antony. He etches the decay of his spirit, the tragic infatuation and the final downfall with telling strokes. Miss Leigh, lovely to see and enchanting to hear, is moving as the wilfull, tempestuous siren of the Nile. Robert Helpmann's Octavius Caesar strikes a perfect note. He emphasizes the calculating coldness, the priggishness, the determination of the man intent upon becoming ruler of the world.

Harry Andrews is a stalwart, lusty Enobarbus, and Niall MacGinnis a bluff Pompey. There are other outstanding performances by Robert Beaumont, Katharine Blake, Donald Pleasence, Wilfrid Hyde White, Harold Kasket, Mairhi Russell, Lyndon Brook and Dan Cunningham.

The Leigh-Olivier idea of presenting G. B. Shaw's "Caesar and Cleopatra" and Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra" on successive evenings is an excellent one. It gives you the whole story by masters of comedy and tragedy. It offers interesting, contrasting approaches to history.

A rousing salute is due Gilbert Miller for bringing these distinguished players and wonderful plays over from England. A visit to the Ziegfeld is imperative. We trust that those who failed to buy their tickets well in advance may find generous friends willing to sacrifice their reservations. But we doubt that many will. After all, the engagement is regrettably limited to sixteen and a half weeks.

"Caesar and Cleopatra"

New York World-Telegram and The ~~Evening~~ Sun

December 20, 1951

Olivier and Leigh Make the Nile Live

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Half lotus flower, half electric eel, Vivien Leigh mocked and cavorted her way through Shaw's "Caesar and Cleopatra" last night, to the delight of as fashionably dressed an audience as Manhattan can produce.

It was Laurence Olivier as the Roman Emperor, who gave the play its force and balance. The evening had something of the mood of a river boat excursion about it. And if Olivier was a steady helmsman, Miss Leigh was a vivid pennant on the mast, festive and attracting attention, in whatever breeze was blowing.

There is a rollicking air about this company's robust performance. The play marches at a brisk pace most of the time, and there is a tangible boost to the spirits in its smartness.

Shavian Ideas Shaved.

If it does not always do full justice to the wit and wiseness of Shaw, the cast certainly keeps you interested, and enjoying yourself.

Cleopatra comes of age in this encounter with Caesar. She discovers that she must pay her way through life, and finds that petulant ruthlessness will hold for her neither the paternal protection nor the fond guidance of the Roman Emperor.

Some of the plot's delicacies, and a good many of Shaw's ideas, go up the flue in this production. The reasons, I believe, are a tendency to speed, which will relax, some unfamiliar accents, and a house much bigger than the one in which the cast has been playing in London.

The Grandeur That Is Tired.

Olivier's being a striking Caesar will surprise no one who knows anything about his career and reputation. His Roman is a man of stature and human vanities, capable of humor and solemnity.

His commanding scenes of the third act give the whole performance dignity and purpose. But even in the earlier, lighter sequences, he is remarkably authentic in the detail of his impersonation. With lengthened nose and lips drawn down at the corners, he achieves the sunken look of an aging man's jaw. Even his knees and ankles seem old, as he walks with a weary indefiniteness.

Miss Leigh's effects are more often physical than mental. When she matures toward the end of the play, it is harder for her to project her ideas, because she has previously been so graphic.

As the frivolous, cowardly, arrogant baby Queen, she sometimes uses the best of the Mack Sennett technique, then again moves and poses in imitation of an Egyptian frieze. The result is mercurial, exquisite and arresting, and most suitably never seems very originally thoughtful. This particular Queen is irresistible, all right, and her undependability is sinister.

Robert Helpmann is a lyrical and jaunty Apollodorus, who takes Cleopatra to Caesar rolled in a Persian rug.

The costumes are fabulously lovely, reaching a peak in an orchid and gold Fortuny robe for the Queen. The military men are more often dressed with regard for desert weather than girded for battle.

"CAESAR AND CLEOPATRA"

Play by George Bernard Shaw; staged by Michael Benthall; settings by Roger Furse; music by Herbert Menges; costumes by Audrey Cruddas; presented by Gilbert Miller at the Ziegfeld Theatre, December 19, 1951. The cast:

Belzanor	David Greene
Persian	Edmund Purdom
Bel Affris	Robert Beaumont
Flatateeta	Pat Nye
Julius Caesar	Laurence Olivier
Cleopatra	Vivien Leigh
Charmian	Katharine Blake
Iras	Mairhi Russell
Pothinus	Harold Kasket
Theodotus	Timothy Bateson
Ptolemy	Dawson France
Achillas	Dan Cunningham
Rufio	Niall MacGinnis
Britannus	Wilfrid Hyde White
Lucius Septimus	Harry Andrews
Apollodorus	Robert Helpmann
Centurion	Anthony Pelly
Boatman	Patrick Troughton
Musician	Ronald Adam
Harpist	Elizabeth Kentish
Major-Domo	Donald Pleasence
Priest	Terence Owen

The New York Times

December 20, 1951

First of Olivier Portraits of Cleopatra Put On at the Ziegfeld Theatre

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Awaiting the Oliviers has been worth while. Their "Caesar and Cleopatra," which opened at the Ziegfeld last evening, is a triumph of style, and Mr. Olivier's portrait of Caesar is a masterpiece. This is Shaw's contribution to the lustrous legend of the Nile, which New York saw in 1949. Tonight the same troupe will play Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra," and then we shall know the full value of the treasure the Oliviers have brought to America.

On the evidence of the first of the twin productions it is easy to speculate about the nature of their contribution. For the Oliviers and their company are stylists in acting, and they can stamp a play with a single idea. When Shaw used to jest about his similarity to Shakespeare, most of us were vastly amused.

* * *

But Shaw can be played on the heroic level; "Caesar and Cleopatra" is very impressive that way, and Shaw's lean and spare literary style seems richer than most of us had supposed. This is the transfiguration that Mr. Olivier has wrought. He plays Caesar less for wit and humor than for character, and Caesar is a memorable figure on those terms.

He is an aging hero, a little tired of so much campaigning and of the follies of the world. His face is lined; his hair is thin and he walks with a stoop of weariness. But his mind is still keen; he enjoys making quick decisions and his tenderness and clemency are the wisdom of a man who has learned from a long, full experience. Without being stately Mr. Olivier acts Caesar in the heroic vein and creates a man who is larger than life.

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What Mr. Olivier achieves is a contribution to the Shaw theme. As the girlish Cleopatra, Miss Leigh's contribution is not that large. Slight and animated, she brings a quality of cameo beauty to the part. And if Lilli Palmer had not recently given it more sparkle, warmth and subtlety, we might all feel that Miss Leigh's acting were of the first rank. For her Cleopatra, ravishingly costumed, is quick-witted, adroit, disarmingly girlish and uncommonly decorative.

In comparison with the New York "Caesar and Cleopatra" of 1949, the distinction of the Olivier production is the harmony of the group acting. The play has been mastered by everybody. Under Michael Benthall's direction, every actor plays in the same key; the performance has rhythm and design. Roger Furse has caught the golden splendor of Egypt in scenery that evokes the mood of the play; and Audrey Cruddas has dressed the actors brilliantly.

The cast is too long to be itemized here. But something should be said in acknowledgment of Niall MacGinnis' loyal, patient, rude-mannered Rufio, Robert Helpmann's lightly-drawn sketch of Apollodorus and Harold Kasket's obese and disingenuous Pothinus. Although "Caesar and Cleopatra" is a long, loquacious drama, Mr. Olivier and his colleagues have found theatrical structure in it, and brought exuberance to the scenes that are the liveliest.

Mr. Olivier's approach is at the expense of some of the wit and raillery. But it has struck a sound balance by discovering poetry in some of Shaw's prose. At least one Gotham playgoer never realized before how comfortably the heroic style can rest on the shoulders of our lately-lamented ancient of letters. Like Shaw, Mr. Olivier has mastered the language.

Journal-American

December 20, 1951

A Wonderful Show, An Immaculate Cast

By JOHN McCLAIN

Following a prodigious fanfare Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh moved into the Ziegfeld Theatre last evening where, under the auspices of Gilbert Miller, they began a limited engagement playing G. B. Shaw's "Caesar and Cleopatra" and Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra" on alternate nights.

It was an extremely plush audience that turned out for the first one, the Shaw show, and there was a general awareness, as the lights dimmed, that "this had better be good." Well, it was. "Caesar and Cleopatra" may have been more skillfully performed, but not within my memory.

Olivier's Caesar is memorably mellow and mature, a tired warrior and philosopher imparting his wisdom to a girl queen.

I am told that Miss Leigh has an offspring older than the Cleopatra whose role she essays, but this seems hard to believe unless her daughter actually was playing the part. In action, voice and figure she was the embodiment of Shaw's spoiled, immature heroine.

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Cast Immaculate

The supporting cast was immaculate. The sets were designed with simplicity and ingenuity; Michael Benthall's direction was smooth and imaginative and I was notably impressed with the incidental music of Herbert Menges.

As ever, Miller has waved his golden wand over the proceedings with salutory results. Even the third spear-carrier in the back row looks like an incipient Hollywood hero. Probably is.

Shaw's play, in case you've forgotten, concerns Caesar's personal conflict with Pompey for the control of the Roman Empire, an altercation which leads him to Egypt on the heels of his rival.

When he gets there he discovers that Pompey has been conveniently beheaded. Egypt was then being ruled by Ptolemy, an infant emperor, who had chased his sister, Cleopatra, aged 16, off the throne.

Caesar meets Cleopatra and is immediately attracted to her. The rest of the play involves his maneuvers in restoring her as queen and suppressing the efforts of her kid brother's supporters to chase the Roman invaders out of Alexandria.

In the course of all this she acquires a liberal education in Roman morals and jurisprudence, as relayed by her aging sponsor, and emerges a more mature though no less unpredictable ruler.

* * *

Stage Is Set

Caesar finally departs for Rome, promising that he will send her Marc Antony, his lieutenant, as a gift—thus rather neatly setting the stage for "Antony and Cleopatra," which they will present tonight.

Among the leading players I was particularly pleased with the performances of Pat Nye as Fiatateeta, the nurse to Cleopatra; Harold Kasket as Pothius; Niall MacGinnis as Rufio; Wilfred Hyde White as Britannus (Shaw's barbed belt at the English); Robert Helpmann as Apollodorus; Harry Andrews as Septimius and little Dawson France in his brief and unhappy moment as the deposed king.

Olivier, usually a vigorous and youthful type, succeeds in make-up and manner in suggesting the fifty-ish Caesar, a character of immense experience and sophistication who none-the-less is not unaware of the attractions of the girlish Cleopatra.

Miss Leigh brings to her part the incredible illusion of youth mentioned above, but also the delightful truculent and impish quality reminiscent of her performance in "Gone With the Wind." I would not have been too shocked if, when Caesar shoved off, she chose to say, "Fiddle-dee-dee."

As you know, this is a limited engagement and the word is that it's practically sold out for the entire run. So it's no good telling you by all means to go and see it—you probably can't get a seat. But it's certainly worth a try.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

December 20, 1951

"CAESAR AND CLEOPATRA"

By WALTER F. KERR

THERE was excitement in the air Wednesday night as Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh unwrapped the first of our Christmas packages from London—a glistening production of Shaw's "Caesar and Cleopatra." They are following through, also at the Ziegfeld, with Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra" and, because in this instance the plays have been conceived as companion pieces, it would be nice if a reviewer could wait to let the plays and players make their own contrasts, strike their own balances. But today we must render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, even while remembering that it is only one half of the picture.

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"Caesar" is not Shaw's best play but it offers a charming lesson in the education of a royal minx at the hands of a weary, worldly-wise man. The two parts should, in many respects, prove ideal for the rich and versatile talents of this acting duo, and in many respects they do. Miss Leigh is given the opportunity to purr and to claw, to whimper and to command, and she goes at the antics of a cub who is on the way to being a lioness with fascinating abandon. Mr. Olivier is given a crack at a quiet and mature characterization far removed from the heroic and explosive roles with which he made his way to the front rank of living actors, and he clearly enjoys the change.

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There is a question, though, whether in the pursuit of a special challenge, and in the process of putting two very dissimilar plays side by side, they haven't lost sight of the particular character of this one. When Shaw writes a historical play, he provides all the necessary background, the political facts; but the fun is in the intellectual banter after these other things have settled down, in the urbane point of view which can be brought to bear on them. Michael Benthall's production races by like a romantic melodrama, and the sardonic humor, the controlled impudence, and the caustic realism which most interested the author never quite gets a hearing.

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In part, this is due to the fact that Olivier has steeped himself almost too much in the world-weariness of his Caesar. From the time that he first shuffles from behind a baby Sphinx—pale, slightly stooped, faintly nasal of voice—he is so thoroughly and honestly a tired conqueror that he leaves very little room for the joyous asperity, the intellectual liveliness, we have come to associate with the part. In itself, his is a completely realized performance. But because he dismisses the best lines with a low bark, and because he brings an air of abstraction and fatigue even to those scenes in which he is most concerned for the development of his unruly charge, the play as a whole slips out of focus. The characterization is independently arresting, but it does not get the juice out of the play.

Miss Leigh's task is perhaps easier, but she brings greater intensity to it, and she dominates the proceedings most of the way. Though she has a tendency to farce the role in its earlier scenes—it must be confessed that Shaw has made his budding siren awfully kittenish—she grows in stature as the part does. By the time Cleopatra is old enough, and daring enough, to experiment with murder, Miss Leigh is regal, commanding, every inch an unpredictable queen.

In the supporting company, Wilfred Hyde White gets some gentle humor out of the proper Brittanus, Robert Helpmann gives a colorful performance as Apollodorus, and Harry Andrews brings welcome vigor to his brief appearances as Lucius Septimius.

When Caesar is taking his farewell of Cleopatra, at the end of the evening, he promises—in the famous passage—to send her Antony, a man with strength in his arms and fire in his heart. This may provide us with something of a clew to Mr. Olivier's initial performance—he may be playing Caesar down in the expectation of playing Antony up. In any event, we shall see for ourselves.

Daily Mirror

December 20, 1951

Olivier, Leigh Score Top Performances of Year

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The season reached its peak last evening when Gilbert Miller presented Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier in Shaw's "Caesar and Cleopatra" at the Ziegfeld Theatre. The distinguished British acting team is offering this Shaw gem in repertory with Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra," about which we will report to you tonight.

It is an excellent idea to give the two works in sequence. Though they are written in contrasting styles, one a comedy and the other a tragedy, they trace, like a continued story, the rise and fall of the siren of the Nile.

Shaw would probably contend that "Antony and Cleopatra" is an epilogue to his "Caesar and Cleopatra." Shakespeare, being less the publicist, probably wouldn't care much about the credit. And he doesn't have to. Anyway, here is a sumptuous drama feast for a year that should welcome it with open arms.

"Caesar and Cleopatra," as you may recall, tells how the aging, battle-worn, and ever-resourceful Julius Caesar makes a woman and a queen of the childlike, frightened Cleopatra. Caesar, shrewd politician as well as invincible soldier, prefers a resort to statesmanship rather than war, while Cleopatra is a creature of whim and impulse. They represent the age-old conflict between mind and emotion.

The Olivier-Leigh "Caesar and Cleopatra" is notable for its admirable continuity, for its effective ensembles. It emphasizes Shaw as dramatist, rather than wit. The last revival here of the comedy, with Cedric Hardwicke and Lilli Palmer, lacked the smoothness of the current production, but atoned for it with vitality and satiric sparkle.

Olivier plays Caesar as a mellow, thoughtful ruler. Hardwicke played him as a more virile and cynical man of the world. Miss Leigh is a petulant, kittenish Cleopatra. Miss Palmer was more sultry, knowing and imperious in the role. Robert Helpmann, of the Sadler's Wells Ballet, is a graceful, vivid Apollodorus, less effete and, paradoxically, less dynamic than was John Buckmaster.

Salutes also are due Wilfrid Hyde White, as the conventional Britannus; Niall MacGinnis, as the stalwart, obtuse Ruflo; Harry Andrews, as the opportunistic Lucius Septimius; and Pat Nye, as the fierce Ftatateeta.

Roger Furse has designed fluid and impressive settings and Audrey Cruddes, colorful costumes. Working in England on limited budgets, they have done amazing jobs. Michael Benthall's direction blends the acting styles into a satisfying whole. He is more interested in displaying "Caesar and Cleopatra" as a first-rate play than in permitting individual performances to score.

The dual bill opened to an advance sale of close to one million dollars, a fantastic figure. Gilbert Miller tells us the running expenses are $57,000 a week, while the Ziegfeld is scaled to book $60,000. Miller won't make money on his celebrated importation, but he will have the gratification of giving us the outstanding event of the season.